



Louis Bonaparte as a bat, balancing Thiers and the Republic

The Civil War in France

Lenin's 1917 "[The State and Revolution](#)" is a classic that we will get to later on during this course on "The Classics". What we can say about it now is that in that book Lenin goes through some of the other classics, just as we are doing now. In particular, he devotes a whole chapter to the Paris Commune, basing it on Marx's classic book and today's featured Classic, "[The Civil War in France](#)".

A downloadable file of Chapter 5 of Marx's book is attached, and linked below. Let us defer to Lenin and use some of his

work as our main introduction to it.

Early on in his “[Paris Commune](#)” chapter, Lenin refers to another classic, the Manifesto, pointing out that it was modified by Marx and Engels after 1871. This is what Lenin says, while quoting them:

‘The last preface to the new German edition of the Communist Manifesto, signed by both its authors, is dated June 24, 1872. In this preface the authors, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, say that the programme of the Communist Manifesto "has in some details become out-of-date", and they go on to say:

“... One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes'....”[1]

‘The authors took the words that are in single quotation marks in this passage from Marx's book, *The Civil War in France*.’

Lenin goes on:

‘Marx's idea is that the working class must break up, smash the "ready-made state machinery", and not confine itself merely to laying hold of it.

‘On April 12, 1871, i.e., just at the time of the Commune, Marx wrote to Kugelmann:

"If you look up the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire, you will find that I declare that the next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it [Marx's italics--the original is zerbrechen], and this is the precondition for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting."

Lenin proceeds:

‘Today, [i.e. in 1917] in Britain and America, too, "the precondition for every real people's revolution" is the smashing, the destruction of the "ready-made state machinery”...

‘Secondly, particular attention should be paid to Marx's extremely profound remark that the destruction of the bureaucratic-military state machine is "the precondition for every real people's revolution". This idea of a "people's revolution” seems strange coming from Marx, so that the Russian Plekhanovites and Mensheviks, those followers of Struve who wish to be regarded as Marxists, might possibly declare such an expression to be a "slip of the pen" on Marx's part. They have reduced Marxism to such a state of wretchedly liberal distortion that nothing exists for them beyond the antithesis between bourgeois revolution and proletarian revolution, and even this antithesis they interpret in an utterly lifeless way.

‘If we take the revolutions of the 20th century as examples we shall, of course, have to admit that the Portuguese and the Turkish revolutions are both bourgeois revolutions. Neither of them, however, is a "people's" revolution, since in neither does the mass of the people, their vast majority, come out actively, independently, with their own economic and political demands to any noticeable degree. By contrast, although the Russian bourgeois revolution of 1905-07 displayed no such "brilliant" successes as at the time fell to the Portuguese and Turkish revolutions, it was undoubtedly a "real people's" revolution, since the mass of the people, their majority, the very lowest social groups, crushed by oppression and exploitation, rose independently and stamped on the entire course of the revolution the imprint of their own demands, their attempt to build in their own way a new society in place of the old society that was being destroyed.

‘In Europe, in 1871, the proletariat did not constitute the majority of the people in any country on the Continent. A "people's" revolution, one actually sweeping the majority into its stream, could be such only if it embraced both the proletariat and the peasants. These two classes then constituted the "people". These two classes are united by the fact that the "bureaucratic-military state machine" oppresses, crushes, exploits them. To smash this machine, to break it up, is truly in the interest of the "people", of their majority, of the workers and most of the peasants, is "the precondition" for a free alliance of the poor peasant

and the proletarians, whereas without such an alliance democracy is unstable and socialist transformation is impossible.’

The lessons of the Paris Commune are many. Here are some of Marx’s own words from our chosen chapter:

“...no sooner do the working men anywhere take the subject [emancipation of labour] into their own hands with a will, than uprises at once all the apologetic phraseology of the mouthpieces of present society with its two poles of capital and wages-slavery (the landlord now is but the sleeping partner of the capitalist), as if the capitalist society was still in its purest state of virgin innocence, with its antagonisms still undeveloped, with its delusions still unexploded, with its prostitute realities not yet laid bare. The Commune, they exclaim, intends to abolish property, the basis of all civilization!

“Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour. But this is communism, "impossible" communism! Why, those member of the ruling classes who are intelligent enough to perceive the impossibility of continuing the present system — and they are many — have become the obtrusive and

full-mouthed apostles of co-operative production.

“If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production — what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism, "possible" communism?”

Factual note: What had happened in France was that Louis Bonaparte, the nobody, the returned exile, who juggled the classes and deceived them all, had made himself an “Emperor”. But he ran out of options after two decades in power. He decided to make a foolish war on the Prussians, who beat the French and advanced to Versailles, outside Paris. The French government then abandoned Paris like cowards: Hence the formation of the self-governing Paris Commune. In Versailles, a suburb of royal palaces, the Germans (Prussians and others) for the first time agreed among themselves to form a single nation, while at the same time licensing and assisting the defeated French bourgeoisie to destroy their own compatriots (the Communards) in Paris.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Civil War in France, Chapter 5, The Paris Commune](#).
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